

## ILLINOIS EARLY LEARNING COUNCIL STRATEGIC REPORT

Illinois children ages birth through five and their families are served by a wide range of federal and state programs. Members of the General Assembly took a major step toward establishing a statewide high-quality early childhood system by approving legislation in 2003 that created the Illinois Early Learning Council. In 2009, the Governor designated the Illinois Early Learning Council (Council) as the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care. The Council is comprised of 71 gubernatorial and legislative appointees who serve on a voluntary, unpaid basis. Council members represent a broad range of constituencies, including schools, child care centers and homes, Head Start, higher education, state, local, and federal government agencies, the General Assembly, business, law enforcement, foundations, advocates and parents.

This report describes the current early education and care programs in Illinois; the enrollment of children, ages birth to five, in these programs; and the efforts of the Illinois Early Learning Council to build upon current programming to establish a comprehensive, statewide early learning system.

### I. EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE PROGRAMMING

The state of Illinois supports many early learning programs for children from birth to age five and their families, and includes the following programs:

**Preschool for All:** Illinois' PreKindergarten program for at-risk, 3-and 4-year-old children began in 1985, and Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) birth-to-three programs were implemented a few years later. In 2006, Illinois enacted historic Preschool for All legislation, making ours the first state in the nation to offer all three- and four-year-olds the opportunity to participate in voluntary, state-funded high-quality preschool, while, at the same time, expanding high-quality educational opportunities for at-risk infants and toddlers. Key aspects of Preschool for All include:

- Voluntary, high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year-olds whose parents choose it;
- Priority services for at-risk children, with gradual expansion to all children;
- Expanded support for at-risk infants and toddlers; and
- Quality standards, research-based curricula and high staff qualifications are provided in a variety of early learning settings (schools, child care, and other community-based providers).

**Head Start:** Head Start provides comprehensive education, health, nutrition and social services to low-income children and their families. The goal of this federally funded and administered program is to "break the cycle of poverty" and improve children's chances for success in school and later life.

**Early Head Start:** Early Head Start promotes healthy prenatal outcomes for pregnant women, enhances the development of very young children, and promotes healthy family functioning. Early Head Start is a federally-funded program serving low-income families with infants and toddlers and pregnant women.

**Early Childhood Special Education:** Early Childhood Special Education serves three- and four-year-olds with disabilities or significant delays who have Individualized Education Plans. Services are funded through federal, state and local sources.

**Home visiting:** Home visiting provides individuals and families with supportive health and social services directly in their homes. Home visiting offers parents a personalized approach to enhancing their children's readiness to learn in the ways that matter for later success. In these state-funded programs, in-home parent coaches work with families on a voluntary basis –

starting in pregnancy – to build strong parent-child relationships and connecting families to critical services that promote children’s healthy development and early learning from the earliest opportunity.

**Child Care Assistance Program:** Illinois’ Child Care Assistance Program is funded by the federal Child Care Development Block Grant and state resource through the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to provide low-income, working families with access to quality, affordable child care that allows them to continue working and contributes to the healthy, emotional and social development of the child. Families are required to cost-share on a sliding scale based on family size, income and number of children in care.

## II. EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE PROGRAM ENROLLMENT

Illinois is already helping to finance early care and education arrangements for a large number of young children. In fiscal year 2008 (FY08), 50 percent of three- and four-year-olds (179,000 out of 358,000 preschoolers) were enrolled in government-supported early education and child care programs – including Preschool for All, Early Childhood Special Education, Head Start, and/or the Child Care Assistance Program. In addition, some 75,000 infants and toddlers who are at risk of poor outcomes (14 percent of the state’s 540,000 children under age three) received services through government-funded child care, home visiting, and family support programs.

### How Are We Serving Infants and Toddlers?

Program	Children served (birth to age three)
Early Head Start	2,699
Healthy Families Illinois <sup>a</sup>	4,373
ISBE Early Childhood Block Grant	17,680 <sup>b</sup>
Child Care Assistance Program	49,841
<b>Unduplicated Total</b>	<b>74,593</b>
<sup>a</sup> Includes Healthy Families and Parents Too Soon programs	
<sup>b</sup> Prevention Initiative only	
<sup>c</sup> Children who receive more than one type of service are counted in the total only once (1,501 infants and toddlers receive Early Head Start and Child Care Assistance Program services).	

### How Are We Serving Preschoolers?

Program	Children served (ages three to five)
Preschool for All	90,111
Head Start	36,398
Early Childhood Special Education	17,866
Child Care Assistance Program	34,951
<b>Unduplicated Total</b>	<b>179,326 <sup>a</sup></b>
<sup>a</sup> Children who receive more than one type of service are counted in the total only once (15,963 preschoolers receive Preschool for All and/or Head Start and Child Care Assistance Program services).	

## IV. ILLINOIS EARLY LEARNING COUNCIL

In order to coordinate our current early childhood education and care programs into a statewide high-quality early childhood system in Illinois, the Illinois Early Learning Council (the Council) was created in 2003. The Council is governed by Public Act 93-380 (the Illinois Early Learning Council Act), which was co-sponsored by all four legislative leaders and signed into law in 2003. In 2009, the Governor created the Office of Early Childhood Development, which will be housed at the Governor’s Office and will support the Council in its efforts to establish comprehensive, statewide early childhood system.

**Vision**

The vision of the Illinois Early Learning Council is that all children in Illinois start school safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed.

**Mission**

The mission of the Council is to meet the early learning needs of children from birth to age five and their families by establishing a high-quality, accessible, and comprehensive statewide early learning system. This will be accomplished by working to the following goals:

1. Guiding collaborative efforts and making recommendations to coordinate, improve and expand upon existing early childhood programs and services; and
2. Engaging in planning, coordination and linkages across programs, divisions and agencies at the state level as well as making use of existing reports, research, and planning efforts.

**Membership**

The Council is currently comprised of 71 gubernatorial and legislative appointees who serve on a voluntary, unpaid basis. Council members represent a broad range of constituencies, including schools, child care centers and homes, Head Start, higher education, state, local, and federal government agencies, the General Assembly, business, law enforcement, foundations, advocates and parents. The Council includes representation from both public and private organizations, and its membership reflects regional, racial, and cultural diversity to ensure representation of the needs of all Illinois children. The Council is co-chaired by Harriet Meyer, President of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and Julie Smith, Deputy Chief of Staff for Governor Patrick Quinn. In 2008, the Council was reconstituted to meet the membership requirements for the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care as outlined in the Head Start Act of 2007.

**Council Structure**

The Council as a whole meets a minimum of three times a year. Following a Governor's Summit on Early Childhood sponsored by the National Governor's Association (NGA) in 2006, the Council approved a new committee structure to guide its work and to accomplish its priority goals, which currently includes the following committees and workgroups: the Infants and Toddlers Committee; the Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Committee; the Oversight & Coordination Committee; the Public Awareness Committee; the Space Capacity Committee; the Special Populations Committee; the Workforce Development Committee; the Early Childhood Data Workgroup; and the Home Visiting Task Force. The Council also has an Executive Committee, comprised of Council Co-chairs, Co-chairs of Council Committees, and at-large members who serve at the discretion of the Council Co-chairs. The Executive Committee sets the direction of the Council, coordinates work across committees, approves all formal recommendations for consideration by the Council, and coordinates efforts with relevant ongoing planning entities. The Council Co-chairs, with input from the Executive Committee, designate Council Committee Co-chairs.

Council members are encouraged to participate on at least one committee of the Council, and committees also recruit other key early childhood stakeholders who represent a diverse array of constituency groups, as well as the regional, cultural and linguistic diversity in the state. Both members who are formally appointed to the Council and early childhood stakeholders who serve on individual committees act as a collective advisory body, working collaboratively to develop advisory recommendations in keeping with the Council's vision, mission, and goals.

**Accomplishments**

Since its inception six years ago, the Council – in partnership with the Illinois General Assembly, the Governor’s Office and key state agencies – has made significant contributions to raising the profile of Illinois as a national leader in the field of early childhood. The Preschool for All program, based on a blueprint created by the Illinois Early Learning Council, makes Illinois the first state in the nation with the goal of offering high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds while expanding child development and family support services to at-risk infants and toddlers. The Council has also made recommendations that have strengthened the quality of all of Illinois’ early childhood programs for children from birth to age five, continued to build a well-qualified workforce, and enhanced accountability through investments in quality assurance.

**Council Goals**

Building on its successes, the Council has developed the following three-year goals to further its vision to design an early education and care system to improve the school readiness of young children in Illinois:

- Recommend strategies to improve collaboration, coordination and integration across early childhood programs and systems to address the comprehensive nature of children’s healthy development and readiness for school.
- Increase participation to high-quality early learning programs to underrepresented populations and children who face the greatest challenges, such as children with disabilities, children who are homeless, children involved in the child welfare system, children in domestic violence shelters, etc.
- Increase the space capacity in communities to serve children in high-quality preschool classrooms and infant-toddler care and education settings, focusing especially on underrepresented communities.
- Develop strategies for meeting the varied needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families and young children to ensure that they are well-prepared for school.
- Develop recommendations for the establishment of an integrated data collection system on children birth to five who are receiving state- or federally-funded early childhood services.
- Assess the capacity and promote the effectiveness of institutes of higher education supporting the development of early childhood educators.
- Advance a professional development system to support the education and training of early childhood practitioners to promote the attainment of degrees and credentials in order to ensure an adequate and stable supply of highly-qualified and diverse early childhood professionals to provide high-quality early childhood services.
- Ensure the ongoing implementation of high-quality birth-to-five services by recommending systems focusing on quality components and assurances that support both individual children’s learning and development and programs’ continuous improvement.
- Expand access and enhance the quality of early childhood development programs for all at-risk children under three years of age.
- Continue to develop the infrastructure to support a high-quality system of evidence-based home visiting and center-based services for at-risk infants and toddlers.
- Increase participation in high-quality early learning programs by providing consistent, reliable information and outreach to families, early childhood providers, and other stakeholders.
- Nurture and support community level early childhood collaborations.

### **Illinois Early Learning Standards**

The *Illinois Early Learning Standards* reflect what preschool and kindergarten aged children should know and be able to do. They were developed to provide teachers and caregivers in any early childhood care and education setting useful information that will be helpful in their work with young children. The Early Learning Kindergarten Standards aid in the transition of children from preschool to kindergarten. A companion document for parents is also available. The standards are organized to parallel in content the Illinois Learning Standards for K-12 education. Included are benchmarks for learning in Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Science, Physical Development and Health, Fine Arts, Foreign Language, and Social/Emotional Development. The *Illinois Early Learning Standards* include the following principles:

- Early learning and development are multidimensional and interrelated.
- Young children are capable and competent.
- Children are individuals who develop at different rates.
- Children possess a range of skills and competencies in any domain of development.
- Children need clear, developmentally-appropriate educational expectations.
- Young children learn through active exploration of their environment in child-initiated and teacher-selected activities.
- Families are the primary caregivers and educators of young children.

The standards have received national recognition, thus improving the quality and comprehensiveness of the standards is not an immediate priority for the Council over the coming three years. However, the state is likely to revise its K-12 learning standards in the next few years and the Council intends to take a leadership role in ensuring that this overhaul is aligned with the early learning standards in order to benefit early learners. In addition, the Council will also explore the revising the social and emotional early learning standards based on a national study conducted by the Early Childhood Committee of the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership. (The *Illinois Early Learning Standards* can be found at: [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/earlychi/pdf/early\\_learning\\_standards.pdf](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/earlychi/pdf/early_learning_standards.pdf))

### **Needs Assessment**

Currently, there is not a comprehensive, statewide needs assessment that is regularly conducted in Illinois. However, there are a number of tools and activities that are assessing aspects of Illinois' early childhood landscape:

- The Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), a web-based database combining information about early childhood services with demographic information; however, IECAM does not provide data on the full range of early childhood programs in Illinois.
- ISBE is working with the Erikson Institute on a grant to design and implement a Preschool for All program evaluation for birth-to-five programs funded by the Early Childhood Block Grant, which will include information on child and program demographics.
- The Head Start State Collaboration Office recently produced the *Collaboration Needs Assessment Results Report* that identifies opportunities to improve state and local coordination as part of efforts to advance a more integrated early education and care system.
- The Council annually collects and reviews the goals and objectives of the major state-level systems planning bodies in Illinois to help the Council assess the key issues and needs across different early childhood entities as well as advance mutual priorities.

In the next three years, the Council plans to undergo a strategic planning process. As part of this process, the Council will build on the tools listed above to conduct a statewide needs assessment on the quality and availability of early childhood education and development programs and services for children, ages birth to five.

### **Collaboration**

Other early childhood system tables that the Council regularly collaborates with include:

- The Birth to Five Project is a public-private collaborative effort which links state-level systems planning bodies in Illinois; identifies system gaps and barriers that prevent families from accessing the information and programs they need; and develops solutions to these issues.
- Early Learning Illinois is a campaign that works to make the improvement and expansion of early learning opportunities for all children a top priority. The campaign is led by Illinois Action for Children, the Ounce of Prevention Fund and Voices for Illinois Children, along with Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois, the Latino Policy Forum and Chicago Metropolis 2020, and is endorsed by more than 125 organizations and associations in Illinois.
- Enhancing Developmentally Oriented Primary Care (EDOPC) is a partnership of the Advocate Health Care Healthy Steps Program, the Illinois Academy of Family Physicians, the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services. EDOPC works to improve the delivery and financing of preventative health and developmental services for children birth to three.
- Gateways to Opportunity Professional Development Advisory Council is a group of over 75 representatives from early childhood programs, state agencies, advocacy groups, foundations, and higher education institutions. It is focused on designing a comprehensive professional development system for the early childhood field.
- Good Start, Grow Smart is a state-federal partnership working to improve early childhood education; strengthen Head Start; and provide information based on scientific research to teachers, caregivers, and parents.
- IFLOSS Coalition is a public-private partnership focused on improving the oral health of all Illinois residents focusing on access to oral health care including: prevention, education and awareness, and treatment, especially for high risk or underserved families.
- Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership was mandated in 2003 in the Children's Mental Health Act to as a group of 25 members appointed by the governor and, in addition, including representatives from the legislature and a number of state agencies. The Act called for the Partnership to develop and monitor the implementation of a statewide children's mental health strategic plan promoting healthy social and emotional development for all children from birth to adulthood. Illinois also became the first state in the nation to establish social and emotional learning standards beginning with early childhood.
- IDHS Child Care and Development Advisory Council advises IDHS on issues related to the Child Care Assistance Program.
- IDHS Maternal and Child Health Advisory Board advises IDHS on assessments and advice regarding rate structure and implementation of activities related to maternal and child health mortality reduction programs in Illinois.
- Illinois Interagency Council on Early Intervention is a Governor-appointed council that advises IDHS regarding the Early Intervention system Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
- Interagency Nutrition Council promotes health and wellness through nutrition education, coordination of services, and access to nutrition programs in order that Illinois residents achieve food security.
- Strengthening Families Illinois keeps children safe from abuse and neglect by working with children and families at early childhood centers. This initiative has expanded to include a parent leadership development component and a training curriculum for a variety of early childhood providers working with children exposed to trauma and violence.